

TOWARDS BETTER COMMUNITIES

Address of President

W. HAROLD CLARK

to National Conference

COMMUNITY PLANNING ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

Ottawa, October 6th, 1950

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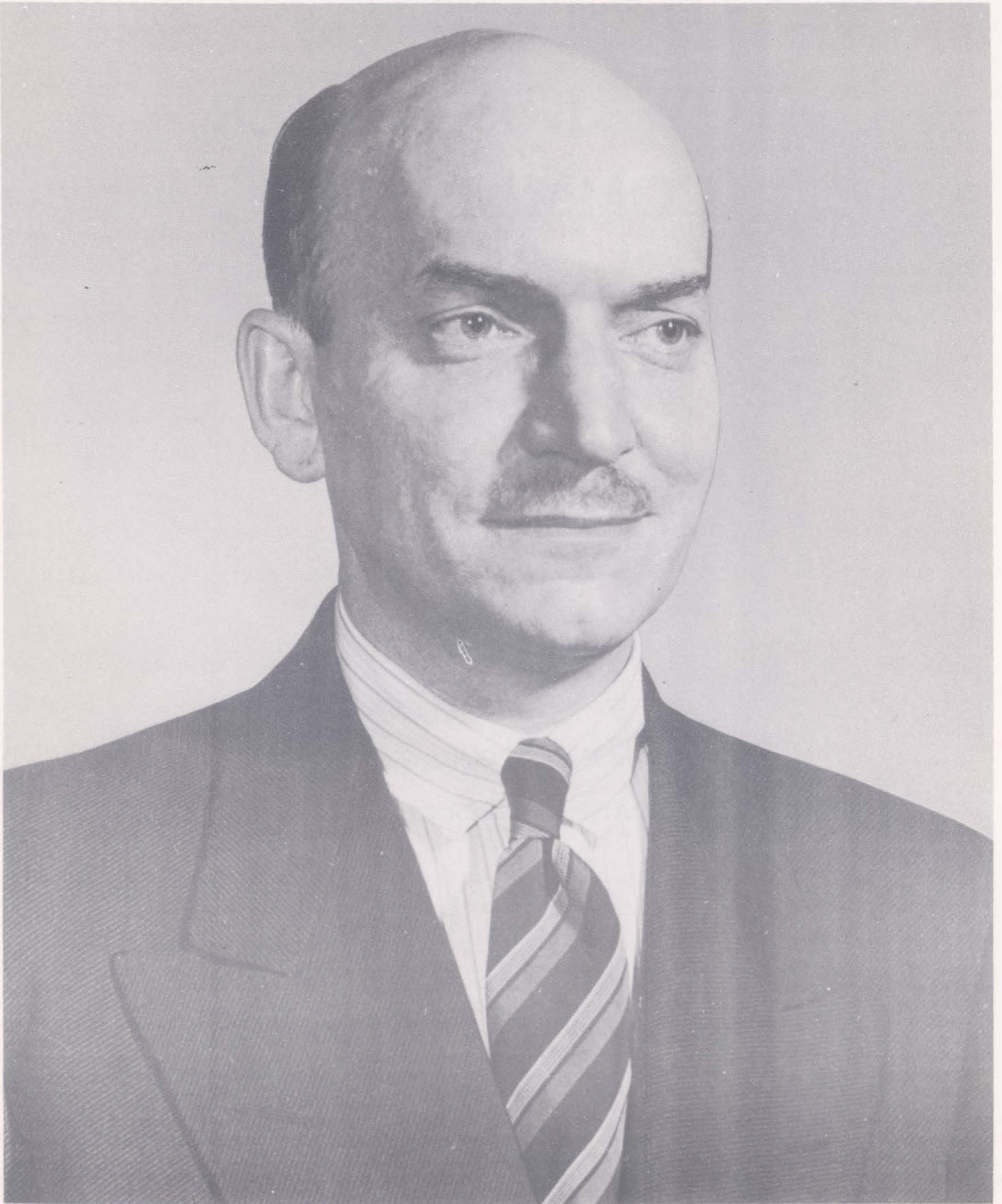
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TOWARDS BETTER-BUILT COMMUNITIES by W. Harold Clark

DEFENCE REQUIREMENTS AND COMMUNITY PLANNING

The question might well be asked "Is it being realistic to hold a Community Planning Conference in our capital city at this time when so much of the productive energy of the country must go into the continuing struggle against aggression, and in the preparation for defending our free way of life."

A cynic might reply "What does it matter, community planners can be tolerated and even encouraged to a certain extent without any disastrous results, as their imprint is not very noticeable as one surveys the Canadian scene."

The question, I think, is a fair one, and there is more than a grain of truth in the cynic's reply. I hope, however, that before this Conference is over it will be clear beyond any doubt that this Conference and the subject matter of the program are even more important because of the domestic implications of the international situation.

I hope, too, that the cynic will realize that in Community Planning, as in other things, there is the authoritarian way of achieving results and there is the democratic way. The former is by compulsion, the latter by consent. Consent willingly and intelligently given requires understanding based on knowledge. It may be a slow process but, as has been said so many times before, the beneficiaries of planning must have a part in the creation of the plans if they are to achieve their purposes. Community Planning in Canada, then, must be part of that free democratic process that we are determined to preserve, so that we and other freedom loving peoples will be permitted to work out our own destiny unmolested by powers whose physical growth has outdistanced their spiritual development.

In giving effect to her determination Canada, by the decision of Parliament and with the whole-hearted approval of her people, has reluctantly accepted the premise that military preparedness is a prerequisite for the defence of our way of life. This means that more and more of our constructive efforts will have to be diverted to building up our own defences and to helping those countries who share our ideals in making more secure their own territories.

The result of government spending in this direction will mean that less money will be available for more constructive purposes, that we will be faced with greater inflationary tendencies and that higher taxes and a mounting national debt are almost inevitable.

We all realize the logic of the Minister of Finance's recent plea to curb the inflationary trend by curtailing construction programs. This is a necessary step, but even if all construction, apart from our defence requirements, were stopped, and this, of course, will not be the case, it should not result in a decline of interest in community planning. It is of interest to note that in a recent statement the Prime Minister intimated that the increase in our defence expenditures could not amount to ten percent of what is now going into capital development.

No one knows precisely to what extent defence planning will effect the economic and social life of the nation. It may be necessary, for instance, to adopt a deliberate policy of dispersing industry and to move key plants out of our crowded and vulnerable cities. This would create problems in the housing of the workers and their families in new areas and might necessitate the revival of large scale government sponsored and financed housing projects. If this should be so, then surely here is a most desirable field for proper community planning.

During the next few years construction programs will have to be re-assessed from time to time in the light of the world situation and our obligations at home and abroad. Some proposed projects will undoubtedly be cancelled or postponed, others expanded, and new projects will be conceived and brought into operation. When a vast number of building projects, and especially public projects, must be re-examined for efficiency and essentiality, then planning responsibilities in relation to time and place become more critical than ever.

One could point out many reasons why an active interest in community planning is as necessary in war, hot or cold, as it is in peace, but I do not think that it is necessary to labor the point except to emphasize that when building is rapid, whether it is for the prosecution of a war, for the strengthening of defences or for fulfillment of peacetime requirements, planning opportunities are greatest.

HOUSING LEGISLATION AND PLANNING OPPORTUNITIES

If planning opportunities are greatest in the periods of greatest building activity, then surely the next few years, at least, hold promise. Many who were at our Winnipeg Conference a year ago will recall that we reviewed the results of four years of feverish building activity and we found that quantitatively great progress had been made, but that qualitatively in terms of order, efficiency and beauty we were woefully lacking in imagination and in ordinary common sense.

Dr. E.G. Faludi in a recent article said that while flying over a sprawling suburban settlement he was reminded of a remark once made to him by Professor Eric Arthur: "What is the use of designing communities with up-to-date facilities when the houses we put in them are like strawberry boxes, unrelated to decent living." Using the same metaphor, Dr. Faludi went on to say: "Acre by acre we are transforming beautiful ravines, field, park lands and wooded sites into dismal rows of unsightly, identical, strawberry boxes that will be with us for a generation at least. These will be future slums growing more and more forlorn as dust from the treeless streets settles on them and the occupants abandon all hope of making attractive anything so basically drab." The approaches to our larger cities with rectangular block after rectangular block containing bungalow or semi-bungalow houses varying only in the color of the roofs and minor exterior treatment, are a familiar sight to us all.

We have reason to be pleased that many young families have been able to acquire small, moderately priced suburban homes instead of being forced to live in congested central areas, perhaps sharing accommodation with others. We have every reason to be displeased, however, when we realize the greater satisfactions that could be enjoyed by the purchasers at no greater cost. Monotony could be relieved by greater variation, natural settings could be preserved by the sparing of trees, parkettes could be provided by better groupings, greater safety could be achieved by elimination of through streets. By all means let us encourage the provision of small homes, not just for shelter, but for safe and gracious living.

This, with a few noteworthy exceptions, was the situation, insofar as new housing is concerned, that we found in almost all our cities and their approaches from one end of Canada to the other as we met in conference one year ago. The rather dull picture was, however, somewhat brightened by the announcement made by the Minister of Reconstruction and Supply a few days before last year's Conference began, that he intended to ask Parliament to amend the National Housing Act so that, with Provincial co-operation, a much better type of housing development would be possible in the future. And so our Conference last year ended on an optimistic note. This optimism was tempered with realism, however, as those present were fully aware that enabling legislation or permissive laws may remain ineffective without enlightened public demand that they be used and used wisely in the public interest.

It seemed timely and appropriate, therefore, that this 1950 Conference should concern itself with the opportunities for good planning that are inherent in our amended housing legislation, with particular reference to those areas that are about to be urbanized.

In order to assess the opportunities, it might be well to review briefly what appear to be the most significant parts of the amendments to the National Housing Act. These amendments make provision for expanded credit facilities and also provide for subsidies, and they contemplate action along several parallel lines.

One major problem faced by private builders and by individuals seeking to construct homes of their own is the lack of serviced land in and around the larger cities. Provision is now made for a federal-provincial attack upon this problem by the joint assembly of land and the provision of services. The land, thus made ready for building activity, may be sold to prospective home owners or builders, or the senior governments may construct dwelling units on the prepared land and may then sell the units to individual home owners.

The senior governments may also build dwelling units for rent, and in that event will turn over the management to a local housing authority which will ultimately recover the whole capital cost from the rents received.

Provision is also made for an additional loan to home purchasers where new homes are financed under the terms of the National Housing Act. This additional loan, which

is intended to reduce the down payment requirements, supplements the so-called maximum loan of 80% of the lending value and amounts to 1/6 of such maximum loan. This, of course, theoretically at least, makes it possible to obtain a loan of 93.3%. The additional loan, however, is only available if the cost of the house to the owner-occupant is considered "reasonable".

The provisions that we have mentioned so far are all in the nature of credit risks and were intended to enlarge the group of Canadians who would be able to purchase homes of their own, or in the case of the rental provision to rent suitable accommodation.

It should be noticed, however, that the "home owning" group can be enlarged or diminished by the simple device of fixing the lending value at the actual cost, or at a percentage of a theoretical cost. A lowering of the "lending value" causing a reduction in the "maximum loan", or a decision that the cost to the purchaser is "unreasonable" could easily nullify the advantages claimed for these sections of the Act. The extent to which this "credit control" device will be used as a deliberate government policy, if at all, will depend to a considerable extent upon the needs and inflationary effect of our defence program.

Another form of aid for which provision is made contemplates the use of public funds for subsidy. During the past quarter of a century and more governments in various parts of the world have come to accept as part of the function of government certain broad social objectives. One of these objectives, adopted by many countries is the provision either directly or indirectly of adequate housing for those people in the lowest income bracket. Our present housing legislation recognizes this social objective and provides the means by which federal and provincial governments may develop rental housing and may turn such housing over to a local housing authority for management with the specific understanding that in all likelihood, there will be operating deficits. These deficits will be borne by governments with the federal government assuming 75% of the loss.

This last form of aid is for public housing as it has been understood for several years in the United States and for a much longer period in Great Britain, other parts of the Commonwealth, and many countries of Europe. There are still many, of course, who believe that there is little, if any, justification for public funds being used

to provide adequate housing for those who are unable to provide it for themselves. I suggest, however, that quite apart from the question of whether or not this is a proper and desirable objective for our senior governments, it is a prime necessity for our municipal governments, and one that will become increasingly so as time goes on. The whole question of municipal finance is of major importance, but I can do no more at this time than to suggest that areas of substandard housing that exist at the very core of all large cities have an adverse influence on municipal assessment and taxes, and on the very solvency of those cities.

The new amendments, we we have seen, contemplate the use of public funds as credit risks, to enable a wider group of Canadians to acquire homes of their own, and they also provide for assistance in the form of contemplated losses, as a means of helping to attain a social objective.

Since the passage of this new legislation almost a year ago, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation has approved of a number of projects. In London and Windsor, Ontario, arrangements have been made for the assembly and servicing of land which I understand will then be sold to private developers. In St. John's, Newfoundland, a subsidized low rental housing project is, I believe, under way. In Vancouver plans have been approved for a development which may include provision for units for the aged, and medium or low rental units. Other projects, too, have been approved or are under consideration.

Where private or institutional funds only are being used to finance the erection of housing units, we must not be too critical at this stage if there is general failure to realize that properly planned projects and balanced communities produce equal or better profits to the builder and much safer credit risks for the large lenders as well as greater satisfaction to the purchasers. Failure to understand this is in part our failure to educate, and the extent of the failure is the measure of our responsibility and of our opportunity.

Where government funds - our funds - however, are being used, either in the form of credit risks, or in the form of subsidies or rent-reduction contributions, then it is clearly our right to insist that these funds shall not be used to produce or to pay the deficit on inadequate, poorly planned or badly located projects.

Being firmly convinced of the necessity for governmental adherence to this principle, your Executive placed this matter before the responsible Federal Minister and urged first - that public credit should only be extended to those areas which are protected by adequate planning measures; and second - that public funds should be made available for the provision of those other necessary parts of a properly balanced community, such as stores, recreational facilities, community halls, and so on. Our Divisional representatives, in some cases, made similar representations to their Provincial authorities.

Assurance has recently been given by the Federal Minister and at least one Provincial Planning Minister that insofar as possible adequate planning measures will be a prerequisite for federal-provincial aid.

Realizing, of course, the pressure under which all governments work, we as members of the Community Planning Association must be alert to any deviation from this principle, as we must never forget that poorly designed or poorly located communities involve not only a waste of money in the initial cost, but they produce continuing costs in terms of taxation and undesirable social effects which will remain with us for generations to come.

You will observe that I have dealt only with federal housing legislation. For the federal laws to be fully effective, provincial enabling legislation must be passed. I am glad to say that seven provinces have already approved the necessary legislation. It must be kept in mind, however, that broadly speaking, central governments can merely redirect the wealth of the country, or that part available for housing, to those areas that have proven needs. This, of course, means that local governments must determine the needs of their communities and must apply, supported by well documented facts, for whatever financial assistance seems appropriate and is available under the terms of the federal-provincial agreements. Here is a real test of whether or not three-way co-operation among our governments is possible in the interests of the people whom they all serve.

INTERNATIONAL HOUSING AND TOWN PLANNING CONGRESS

Some countries do not have the same constitutional problems to surmount in their domestic affairs, as we do in Canada. Perhaps this has something to do with the greater direct activity of their central governments in housing.

The acceptance of the principle of governmental responsibility was very noticeable at the Twentieth International Congress for Housing and Town Planning held at Amsterdam just a month ago, which I had the privilege of attending.

I should like to tell you something of that Congress. There were over five hundred delegates and some two hundred observers present, representing twenty-two countries. Sixty-one delegates came from Germany, thirty-three from France, ninety from Great Britain and nine from the United States. Canada was represented by one delegate and one observer.

I believe the time has come when we should play our full part in such international Conferences, and that we as an Association, together with Governmental agencies and professional bodies should assume the responsibility for sending to such conferences our leading technicians, policy-makers and lay citizens rather than relying upon the attendance of any interested person, competent or otherwise, who may happen to be holidaying in or near the country in which such an international gathering is being held.

The sessions of the Conference dealt with such subjects as the "Role of the Voluntary Housing Association", "The Implementation of Planning Measures", "The Composition of Population in Residential Areas", "Training the Planner" and so on. Mr. Greber (Consultant to The National Capital Planning Service) chaired the session on "Educating the Planner". As several of the sessions were held simultaneously, I was not able to attend them all, and I must not take time to summarize even briefly all the sessions that I did attend. It might be of interest, however, to refer to a few comments that were heard during the discussion periods. A delegate in one session referred to a similar Conference of the same organization held twenty-five years ago when the Conference theme was "Regional Planning", a problem that is foremost in our thoughts in Canada today.

The Voluntary Housing Associations that were discussed bore no resemblance to Housing Associations as we know them in Canada. Our Associations consist mainly of interested citizens, who encourage the adoption of legislative, financial or planning measures designed to produce better housing, while the Housing Associations on the continent are designed to do the actual building of the houses, in almost all cases, of course, with government aid.

The discussion of the "Composition of Population in Residential Areas" centered around the family formations that go to make up the ideal community. It was agreed by all that the ideal community should embrace families of all income levels, of all sizes and of as many varying trades and professions as possible. Young couples, it was pointed out, should not be forced to move to new neighborhoods when children arrive, because no larger premises are available. If these young couples, as they and their children grow older, stay in the same neighborhood it helps to make a balanced community insofar as age groups are concerned. This, of course, is desirable from many angles, not the least of which is the provision of school facilities.

With reference to "Educating the Planner" there was considerable discussion as to whether or not the planner should be more than what might be called a skilled coordinating craftsman. It was held by many that the planner should be trained in the science of Municipal Government and should be one who could sense the pulse of public opinion as well as the atmosphere in a city council chamber.

Lord Silkin, formerly Minister of Town and Country Planning in Great Britain, asked why so many plans have not been implemented. In answer to his own question he suggested that it might be the fault of the planner. "Too much", he said, "is being claimed for him. The community knows what it wants and can pay for. The planner should only translate this. He doesn't decide", he continued, "how many factories, or schools are needed or when they are needed. The planner", he concluded, "should be a technician only with some knowledge of how to deal with officialdom". Professor Brunner, of Austria, supported Lord Silkin's views to a certain extent when he held that one could only become a chief town planner by practice which would bring one into constant contact with public officials. Mr. Abrams, of New York, suggested that technical subjects should be related to the humanities and that a successful town planner should know something of the techniques of adult education. It was suggested by one delegate that after previous training, perhaps in architecture or engineering, or the social sciences, a two year course of intensive study should be undertaken in the principles of town planning, and that a third year should be necessary for those who hoped to become the chief planners of metropolitan areas. I have dwelt at some length on this topic in view of the courses in Town Planning now being developed in our Canadian

Universities, and I would stress particularly the emphasis laid upon the contacts with municipal officials and the desirability of not being too far in advance of public opinion.

Insofar as the "Implementation of Planning Measures" was concerned, one heard precisely the same sort of comment one would hear at a Planning Conference in this country. The need for public knowledge and for citizen participation was stressed, and also the need for close liaison among the planner, the citizens and their appointed and elected officials.

Out of the Conference came several specific suggestions which will be of interest to our Association. I shall do no more than refer to four of them briefly:

1. That when large housing projects are being planned, a certain amount of land, possibly 10%, should be held in reserve for future development. This suggestion arose from the realization that under present conditions there may be a tendency, as in Canada, to concentrate on one size and type of house. In order to obtain a proper balance it may be desirable in the future to add to that community other units of different size, design and cost.
2. This second suggestion is my own. In addition to reserving certain land I suggest for your consideration that we should encourage municipalities, where land is being assembled and serviced by federal-provincial agreement, to use part of the land for the provision of low-rental housing, thus helping to relieve the depressed areas at the centre of our cities and at the same time providing adequate housing for those in the lower income group. If this suggestion were adopted, it should perhaps be on the understanding that for every ten low-rental houses constructed, three, four, or five substandard houses would be demolished. In fact this principle, I believe, should apply to every project where deficits come out of public funds.
3. That an International Town Planning day be held early in November each year.
4. That an invitation from America would be most welcome for the next Congress in 1952.

I cannot close my brief account of the Amsterdam Conference without reference to the more leisurely part which consisted not only of receptions by the municipal authorities at Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague and by the Netherlands Government, but also of three exhilarating bus tours. One tour took us to Rotterdam where we viewed

the remaining evidences of the horrors of war. You will recall that in one day the harbor and the whole centre of the city was laid waste by bombs. With typical Dutch foresight and orderliness it was decided to give first priority in rebuilding to harbor installations, as foreign trade looms large in their economy as it does in ours. Last year this part of the rebuilding was completed. Next priority was given to housing, and while one must regret the apparent lack of adequate project design and the absence of provision for integrated communities in their phenomenal building program, it was, nevertheless, rather thrilling to sense the energy and the urgency with which they are tackling their housing problems. Elock after block of modern apartment houses are rising as proud evidence that the Dutch are a hardy race and that their spirit was not broken or even permanently bent by the foreign invaders. The third part of their program is the re-building of the central business area.

The same activity, the same energy, the same determination - but, unfortunately, the same lack of community design in many cases - was equally noticeable in our tour of the Hague, where literally thousands of pleasant, medium or low rental housing units are either in course of construction or in the planning stage.

One very noticeable feature of the Dutch housing program at least in the larger cities is the almost complete lack of single houses. I shall not endeavour to analyse the reasons for the concentration upon multiple family dwellings. One could not help, however, thinking of our Canadian strawberry boxes.

On another pleasant afternoon we toured the Polders - those areas that have been claimed from the North Sea. Some thousands of farmers are now producing bountiful crops from fertile soil where formerly fishermen in sturdy boats fought for a livelihood against the wind and the sea.

It was not only stimulating to be in the Netherlands and to share for a week their enthusiasm, but it was also heart warming to hear their sincere and thankful tribute to Canada and to our army of liberation. The name Canada holds a high place not only in the Netherlands but throughout much of Europe and in other more distant places.

C.P.A.C. CONFERENCE

It will be our chief concern during this Third National C.P.A.C. Conference to make a contribution - a contribution of practical ideas - to the future development of Canada, so that our reputation as a good and happy country in which to live, will rise even higher and with even more justification.

Now how can this be done? Our contribution as lay or professional planners can only be made, of course, if we understand fully the factors influencing the development of our cities and towns. There are financial factors, legal factors, social factors, and so on. Our program has been designed specifically and in logical sequence to enable us to hear from experts from this and other lands and to permit us to discuss with them those factors that shape our communities.

The outward conditions for satisfactory city life cannot be provided alone by the developer of the individual residential project. When neighbourhoods are built next to one another, and in deliberate relation to the central area and the main circulation system of the city, the whole urban development begins to fall into a planned metropolitan pattern. I think it is fair to say after examining the Association's recent booklet "Problems of Canadian City Growth" that no metropolitan area in Canada is in fact growing to any purposeful pattern at all. Some of our cities are becoming so unwieldy that the task of properly planning their future growth or of deliberately restricting their future expansion is an urgent one. We are fortunate in having as our guests at this Conference authorities who can tell us from personal experience how both planned development and planned restriction or dispersal have been applied in other countries.

Our Association then, in this mid-century year of international unrest and of great domestic problems has a high resolve and a serious purpose - to add its influence and its combined knowledge to the strengthening of those spiritual and physical sinews which make a nation great. We have come to realize the influence of environment on human development. We recognize the value of beauty, efficiency and convenience in the pattern of our cities. We know that sunshine and fresh air cannot be bought, but that they are freely available to all if we plan wisely. Our opportunities are virtually unlimited if we have the vision and the courage to put into practice

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